

VZCZCXRO8266
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNH RUEHPB
DE RUEHHI #2148/01 2350648
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 230648Z AUG 06
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3143
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1676
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 002148

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: EMBASSY ASSESSMENT OF CONDITIONS FOR PROTESTANTS IN
NORTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) JENSEN-ADAMSON DRL/IRF E-MAIL 8/8/06; B) HANOI 894; C) HANOI
1466 and previous

HANOI 00002148 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The GVN appears to be fighting an uphill battle to force northern provincial officials to change their approach to religion. Suspicions that Protestants are agents of the United States are still deeply ingrained in the region, and some local officials find it hard to take seriously disorganized groups of believers. Natural tensions between followers of traditional ethnic minority beliefs and Protestants are often exacerbated by local officials who are themselves ethnic minorities. Other leaders simply seek to avoid any controversy that might draw the international community's attention, while steering clear of any decisions that might be seen as too radical by the GVN. Most officials thus try to delay Protestant requests to register. The GVN is slowly raising the costs associated with stalling tactics, and many officials seem to recognize that their careers are now threatened by bad publicity, but the full import of these pressures will take time to sink in at the local level. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) This message expands upon Ref A analysis of why GVN officials in the north, especially those in the Northwest Highlands region, lag behind the rest of Vietnam in implementing the GVN's new framework for religious freedom, particularly with regard to registration of house church congregations affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN).

¶3. (SBU) We assess that the main reason there have been so few (and possibly no) ECVN registrations to date in northern Vietnam is that Hanoi-based GVN officials are fighting an uphill battle to force provincial officials (especially security personnel) to change their approach to religion. In the north, suspicions that Protestants are agents of the United States are still deeply ingrained. Undoubtedly, many of the senior northern provincial party and security officials established their early reputations by rooting out religious or other "subversive" groups in the 1980's and 1990's, and the institutional instinct to repress such groups remains strong. Outside attention often serves to reinforce this reaction.

¶4. (SBU) It is important to note that ECVN groups in the northwest provinces tend to be very disorganized. Most leaders lack any face-to-face training with qualified pastors, and many believers have only a rudimentary idea of their religion at best. Some local officials find it hard to take such groups seriously. In addition, there is a natural tension that arises between followers of traditional ethnic minority beliefs and new ethnic minority Protestants in these traditional communities. These tensions can be exacerbated by local officials who themselves are usually ethnic minorities.

¶5. (SBU) Our impression from conversations with many officials in the remoter districts of the Northwest Highlands is that their main motivation is to avoid any controversy that might draw the international community's attention. In their view, the worst crime any citizen could commit is to call attention to the officials' performance by accepting ideas from the outside and challenging the accepted social order (and the officials' professional reputations), especially if those ideas are associated with the United States. Thus, in some places, our direct investigation of (or intervention in) conditions for specific Protestant groups seems to have actually worsened these suspicions, at least initially.

¶6. (SBU) Another aspect of this same problem is that most provincial and local officials in these areas seem loathe to take any action that might be seen as unconventional. Official "radicalism" is dangerous to their careers for the same reasons that it is unacceptable for local groups to upset the social order in their communities. Conversely, the safest path for a minor apparatchik is to do nothing, or even to remain hard-line, on the issue of religion.

¶7. (SBU) In short, few local leaders are willing to stick their necks out to advance religious freedom because "it's the right thing to do," and most have resorted to dragging their heels. That said, ECVN has told us before that at least 200 ECVN congregations have developed informal *modi vivendi* with local officials who are either apathetic about religion or content to let groups do what they want so long as the Protestants do not call attention to themselves (Ref B). Many of these groups have opted not to submit applications to register for fear of upsetting this tolerable, if not entirely satisfactory, situation.

¶8. (SBU) This state of affairs is changing as the central government has brought more pressure, through the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Ministry of Public Security, on local officials to fully implement the registration policy. The central government is also slowly raising the costs associated with local

HANOI 00002148 002.2 OF 002

stalling tactics. For example, in a recent provincial leaders' conference, a former deputy prime minister publicly berated northern officials for failing to implement the ordinance on religion. This process appears to be mainly one of negotiation, however, as provincial officials seem to retain considerable latitude to interpret national policy even when given strict implementing instructions.

¶9. (SBU) One other important development that has raised the costs for intransigent local officials is the apparent realization among many of them that it is becoming nearly impossible to keep news of incidents involving religious groups from reaching outsiders and hence the international community. Many of the officials have clearly started to understand that their careers are now threatened by bad publicity just as they are by "social disorder." This more than anything else may be decisive in the long run in changing provincial officials' approach to social issues like religion, but the full import of this change will take time to sink in across the institutions of local government. In fact, some areas probably won't change until more hard-line officials are replaced in the GVN's normal personnel cycle.

¶10. (SBU) In sum, we assess that the reason there have been only six (unconfirmed) registrations in the last 18 months in the north is that the GVN must first change the official mindset of the region. The CRA's apparent success to get most provinces to allow Protestants to worship without much official harassment was the first major hurdle in this process, but not the last. The process of registration is actually empowerment of believers in the face of local officialdom, and most will look for ways to delay this while the numbers of Protestants remain relatively small. The CRA argues that once their pilot registrations have been accomplished in Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Ha Giang (Ref C), the process will pick up steam across the region, but that remains unproved.

MARINE